An Interview with

Rev. Zachary Jones *Unity Fellowship Church • Brooklyn, NY*

Interviewed by Egypt Freeman 1994

Introduction

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Since 1985, Unity Fellowship, a black gay religious movement, has spread to urban centers around the nation—including Los Angeles (founding site), Detroit, Washington, D.C. and New York. Each city houses a church where black gays and lesbians reaffirm their faith in a God who loves them as they are. This approach to religious philosophy would certainly send Pat Robertson and other traditional religious zealots into shock, but Unity leaders and followers alike believe that God's love is unconditional, unearned and available for all.

Roughly two decades ago, homosexuals—mostly white—found God's favor through the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) organized in Los Angeles by Rev. Troy Perry. This movement, while still active today and open to all who are gay or lesbian, did not address the needs of its black constituents who face isolation not only because of their sexual preference, but also because of race.

It wasn't until 1985 that Bishop Carl Bean (most famously known as the recording artist who sings what has become a gay and lesbian national anthem "I Was Born This Way") founded the Unity Fellowship Movement in Los Angeles, giving gay and lesbian African Americans a place to worship that was uniquely rooted in their own traditional religious culture.

Not too long after Bishop Bean founded Unity Los Angeles, he recruited Rev. Zachary Jones. Rev. Zach (as he is known), well-versed in new age religious philosophy mixed with the traditional black Pentecostal experience, quickly became active in the church, creating the Sunday school curriculum and the introductory classes all members must attend before they can be baptized.

When visiting black gays from New York City approached Bishop Bean in L.A. about starting an NYC chapter, Rev. Zach was the prophet ready to go. In the first two years, Unity-New York grew to a weekly attendance of 500+. Opposite an empty lot and an abandoned building on one side of the street and the well-kept brownstones of Clinton Hill, Brooklyn on the other, Unity Fellowship stands as the place where black lesbians and gays, transsexuals and transvestites, straights and everyone else venture each Sunday afternoon at 3 p.m. to learn of God's love for them.

Here the Rev. Zachary Jones, the articulate and inspirational leader of Unity-New York, speaks about the movement and how it is reexploring Christianity and religious thought for its followers.

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E Freeman: **You mentioned that African Americans are the primary target, why is that?**

Rev. Zach: Well a gay church like the Metropolitan Community Church has existed for 20 years, but it's mostly white and their experience is culturally different from our experience. Unity Fellowship was created to give gay African Americans that same church experience that has always been a part of their religious upbringing only with an interpretation that we can apply to our daily lives.

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E Freeman: What are some examples of Judeo-Christian principles that do not apply toward positively affecting the ills of the community?

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Rev. Zach: The basis for the Unity ministry is love. Love is the unconditional basis for Jesus's teachings. He taught love across all traditional lines like race, class, political barriers and oppression. There are records that show that Jesus politically challenged and was not inhibited by political norms of the day. For example, the Samaritan woman who Jesus allowed to drink from the well. When Jesus was alive Jews believed that they were the chosen people and so in order to get God's love you had to be Jewish. But even after you converted to Judaism through a process known as Circumcision, you still were considered a second-class Jew. Jesus didn't teach that. That's why he gladly offered the Samaritan woman the water even though it had been supposedly only for Jews to drink. You don't have to go through a ritual of becoming a Jew to be accepted by God. Jesus celebrated and participated in rituals, but in and of themselves, rituals were not the things that determine God's love.

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E Freeman: **Is there a religious battle for acceptance?**

Rev. Zach: The Metropolitan Community Church wants to be accepted by the World Council of Churches (WCC)—the organization that says whether or not a church is a viable denomination. That is not our battle. Whether WCC approves or not, we will still exist. I don't need someone to tell me I am or am not. The benefits come from seeing people I teach apply the principles of Liberation Theology and have better lives.

E Freeman: **Is it necessary for every gay and lesbian to come out of the closet for gays and lesbians to make progress?**

Rev. Zach: I've never understood the definition of "coming out of the closet." Being who you are is who you are. Living a lie is problematic and that's all in a state of mind. Lying about who you are and what you do is also problematic. We are people—social people. We have a need to share in celebration—share our family, share our sorrows, share our lives. And when we have to do that under the disguise of being straight—like saying roommate instead of lover—that's not healthy. The goal has never been to bring folks out of the closet. The goal is to love yourself for who you are not who you think you have to be to please someone else.

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UNITY FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

Love Is For Everyone !

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The Unity Fellowship Movement was founded, incorporated and chartered (as a 501© (3) non-profit religious organization) in Los Angeles, California in the year 1985. The " Mother Church", also known as Unity Fellowship of Christ Church, is currently located in Los Angeles, California.

The inspiration or vision to establish Unity Fellowship Church was given to its founder Reverend Carl Bean. After many years of study and seeking spiritual truth, it was revealed to Rev. Bean that the spiritual path is eternal and traveled by all. "We all partake of spirit for without spirit there is no life."

The one fact that was constantly revealed to Rev. Carl Bean in dreams,, visions and other heightened spiritual experiences is nothing compares with, equals or surpasses **"LOVE", for "GOD IS LOVE" and LOVE HAS NO RESPECT OF PERSON.**

We are the very essence of Love as is all creation regardless of race, creed, color, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, class, whether animal, fish, plant life, planets, galaxies known or unknown. **There is no place in creation where Love is not present.**

If we, the world over, would learn to say yes to **Love, regardless of what spiritual path we take**, there would be **no need to fear anyone and thereby we would embrace everyone.**

WHAT WE BELIEVE

GOD IS LOVE , AND LOVE IS FOR EVERYONE

It is impossible to love each other without a sense of mutual (equal) worth and respect for each other.

ROMANS 13:10

LOVE WORKETH NO ILL TO A NEIGHBOR: THEREFORE LOVE IS THE FULFILLING OF THE LAW.

1st JOHN 4:20

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO LOVE GOD WHOM WE'VE NEVER SEEN AND HATE OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS WHOM WE SEE EVERY DAY.

God is neither male nor female, God is spirit and spirit has no gender.

Liberation Theology for all, a theology that frees the oppressed therefore:

- Not a male dominated hierarchy.
- Not oppressive to women.
- Not just European in scope.
- Must relate to people of Color and their various cultures around the world.
- Not oppressive to Lesbian and Gay people.
- Allows us to think and discern through human reason and experience.
- Not oppressive to Native Americans or their spirituality nor any other oppressive use scripture.

We believe in the teachings of Jesus but **we DO NOT** dismiss all other faiths and beliefs as wrong or second to our way of believing.

GOD IS GREATER THAN ANY RELIGION, DENOMINATION OR SCHOOL OF THOUGHT.

God is **spirit**, alive and at work in the Moslem Mosque, the Jewish Synagogue, the Christian Church and Tribunal Ritual. **God is everywhere present.**

We believe the Bible and all great spiritual writings or guides must be read taking into consideration the time of the writing, the traditions practiced at that time and the fact that we have the right to question and examine all interpretation.

A person's belief system

...**MUST** be supportive of **HEALTHY SELF ACCEPTANCE**

...**MUST** support **SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

...**MUST** encourage **PHYSICAL, PSYCHIC** and **MENTAL HEALTH**

ENLIGHTMENT AND REVELATION ARE CONTINOUS AND DID NOT STOP WITH THE BIBLE WRITERS.

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AND LOVE IS
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CHURCH GREETING AND AFFIRMATION

(Said While Embracing each other)

YOU ARE VERY SPECIAL!

Reverend Antonio F. Jones, Pastor
P. O. Box 55340
Atlanta, GA 30308
(404) 752-5030

Worship & Study Service
Sunday 3-5PM
Membership Class
Sunday 2PM

An Interview with

Rev. Zachary Jones *Unity Fellowship Church • Brooklyn, NY*

Interviewed by Egypt Freeman 1994

Introduction

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Since 1985, Unity Fellowship, a black gay religious movement, has spread to urban centers around the nation—including Los Angeles (founding site), Detroit, Washington, D.C. and New York. Each city houses a church where black gays and lesbians reaffirm their faith in a God who loves them as they are. This approach to religious philosophy would certainly send Pat Robertson and other traditional religious zealots into shock, but Unity leaders and followers alike believe that God's love is unconditional, unearned and available for all.

Roughly two decades ago, homosexuals—mostly white—found God's favor through the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) organized in Los Angeles by Rev. Troy Perry. This movement, while still active today and open to all who are gay or lesbian, did not address the needs of its black constituents who face isolation not only because of their sexual preference, but also because of race.

It wasn't until 1985 that Bishop Carl Bean (most famously known as the recording artist who sings what has become a gay and lesbian national anthem "I Was Born This Way") founded the Unity Fellowship Movement in Los Angeles, giving gay and lesbian African Americans a place to worship that was uniquely rooted in their own traditional religious culture.

Not too long after Bishop Bean founded Unity Los Angeles, he recruited Rev. Zachary Jones. Rev. Zach (as he is known), well-versed in new age religious philosophy mixed with the traditional black Pentecostal experience, quickly became active in the church, creating the Sunday school curriculum and the introductory classes all members must attend before they can be baptized.

When visiting black gays from New York City approached Bishop Bean in L.A. about starting an NYC chapter, Rev. Zach was the prophet ready to go. In the first two years, Unity-New York grew to a weekly attendance of 500+. Opposite an empty lot and an abandoned building on one side of the street and the well-kept brownstones of Clinton Hill, Brooklyn on the other, Unity Fellowship stands as the place where black lesbians and gays, transsexuals and transvestites, straights and everyone else venture each Sunday afternoon at 3 p.m. to learn of God's love for them.

Here the Rev. Zachary Jones, the articulate and inspirational leader of Unity-New York, speaks about the movement and how it is reexploring Christianity and religious thought for its followers.

E Freeman: **Who comes to Unity?**

Rev. Zach: The church is open to everyone, but our target audience is lesbians and gays of African American descent. I know for a fact, however, that we have a small percentage of straight people including married couples. I once rode the train with a straight couple who learned about Unity from a gay friend who was visiting from Detroit. They came and found the message to be more appealing than traditional churches. The straights who come are progressive, open-minded people who have gone beyond a traditional way of thinking. We also have elderly people who come. They are the elderly gay or parents of lesbian and gay members.

E Freeman: **You mentioned that African Americans are the primary target, why is that?**

Rev. Zach: Well a gay church like the Metropolitan Community Church has existed for 20 years, but it's mostly white and their experience is culturally different from our experience. Unity Fellowship was created to give gay African Americans that same church experience that has always been a part of their religious upbringing only with an interpretation that we can apply to our daily lives.

E Freeman: **Are you an ordained minister in the traditional sense?**

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We believe in order to practice Love we must be involved in the affairs of society, fight for social justice and provide for all according to need.

Feeding the hungry

Clothing the naked

Providing education

Visiting the sick and shut-ins

Visiting Prisons

Housing the Homeless

Protecting and preserving animal, plant and marine life

Protecting our environment

Consoling the bereaved

Burying the dead and the many other ways that we might be of service to world society

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College in California and went on to study at Palos Verdes Bible Seminary where I graduated in 1981 and then I went to Believer's Bible College where I finished in 1983. I studied traditional theology at those schools where I was taught traditional Protestant teaching. Homosexuality and theology was not dealt with in a positive sense, even though many members of congregations were homosexuals.

E Freeman: After Seminary school, did you pastor a traditional church?

Rev. Zach: I was a youth pastor for two years at South Bay Christian Center in Los Angeles. And then I became a youth pastor at West Adams Four Square Church also in South Central LA. For two years I worked with young adults there.

E Freeman: Did you know you were gay then?

Rev. Zach: I knew I was gay from childhood. I had a very gay teenage. I had boyfriends in junior high and around the neighborhood; experienced puppy love and the phone calls that went on and on about nothing.

E Freeman: Did your parents know?

Rev. Zach: My parents knowing and acknowledging came at two different time periods. They probably knew I was gay when I was 12, but they didn't acknowledge it until I was 31. When I was younger, they tried to overlook it by putting me in the Boy Scouts.

E Freeman: What sort of problems did being gay create for you growing up?

Rev. Zach: When I was around 16 or 17, I had a girlfriend and a boyfriend. I was really close to my girlfriend's Mom. One night her Mom said to me "You know Zach, you're trying to lead two lives and it just can't work that way." She never explained specifically what she was saying but I left her house knowing that I had to make a decision about my life. This experience gave me a consciousness about how others perceived me. I decided that a commitment to serve God would cure me of my homosexuality, so I attended seminary, married and had a son.

E Freeman: When did that outlook begin to change?

Rev. Zach: After an on-going struggle, while I was an assistant pastor at West Adams, I told my pastor I was gay. Now, this was a strict Pentecostal church. My pastor's wife was very supportive and so was my pastor to a lesser degree, but the wife dealt with me as a demonic instrument. She described my homosexuality as an internal battle between Satan and God, a battle I would have to fight to overcome. My wife knew of my battle and was also very supportive.

Throughout this time period I thought my marriage would fix me. Then I thought that buying a home or parenting my little boy would fix the marriage. I thought that disassociating myself from men who were gay would cure me. Fasting, praying, studying other faiths, drowning myself in work—nothing worked, so I became very discouraged. And when it got out that I was gay, I felt very stigmatized. People were no longer supportive of me and my work with the youth.

E Freeman: When did the breaking-point come?

Rev. Zach: In 1984, I decided I was unhappy in my marriage; unhappy at church. I decided to leave because I was losing the ability to live monogamously with my wife. Coupled with guilt and shame, it became very overwhelming. I felt I needed to make a choice, so I left; packed up the car and I left.

E Freeman: Where did you go?

Rev. Zach: I moved to Inglewood (area in Los Angeles) and from 1984-1987, I disassociated myself from the church. I partied, clubbed, screwed around—lived the fast life.

E Freeman: What happened in 1987?

Rev. Zach: I met a young man—we were dating—and he said to me I would like you to come to church with me, and I thought here we go again. And it was Unity Fellowship. It was very small, at most 50 people. I had a nice experience, but I thought for sure I wouldn't return, but I started coming regularly. One Sunday, as I was going to shake Bishop Bean's hand and he looked at me and said 'You're going to play a major role in this church.' I thought he had missed it because he didn't really know anything about me.

E Freeman: How did you get involved from there?

Rev. Zach: I was at first reluctant to get involved because in group settings gay folks are not usually there for the business at hand but for other reasons like cruising, gossiping, etc. But after Bishop Bean told me I'd play a major role someday, I couldn't shake it. Later I told him about my experience and education, and I said whatever help he needed I would be there. Shortly after that, I put together the curriculum for Sunday school entailing a lot of metaphysical stuff to train the membership.

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E Freeman: **Now thus far your experience had been only with traditional theology. Where did you get the education to put together a metaphysical curriculum that is supportive of homosexuals?**

Rev. Zach: When I was trying to find myself [1984-1987], I started studying Eastern religion as a way to try to reconcile and find answers. My sister was involved in Eastern Seeks—people who follow a combination of Buddhism, Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, and Metaphysics. Studying taught me how to view Judeo-Christian things differently and to see what Jesus was really trying to teach the Jews at that time. His teachings were in line with what Eastern Seeks believe—that God is within each of us. What we forget is that Jesus was not a Christian. Christianity developed after Jesus. So this concept of God being up somewhere 'sitting high and looking low' was not what Jesus taught. Christianity claims to teach the teachings of Christ, but what modern Christianity often teaches is the worship of Christ and not the teachings of Christ.

E Freeman: **What does teaching the "worship of Christ" mean?**

Rev. Zach: By the worship of Christ I mean Christianity teaches that Jesus existed and died and will come back to get all the good people and put the bad people in hell. Believing in Christ without a knowledge of his actual teachings does nothing to address a practical approach to Christianity. It doesn't help folks deal with real problems like day-to-day survival, economics, ghetto living, dysfunction.

E Freeman: **As opposed to the "worship of Christ," what do you teach at Unity?**

Rev. Zach: What we teach in a metaphysical sense is Liberation Theology. We teach Liberation Theology and Metaphysics. We take the teachings of Christ and we look at the problems in our community: alcoholism, dysfunctional relationships, AIDS, double and triple oppression (black, gay, and female) and other manifestations of oppression and pain and we ask does Judeo-Christianity provide support for these ills? Is it an institution for social change? And when we put those standards against the needs of the community, we find that some concepts of Judeo-Christianity apply and others do not, so we draw from the faith that does address these problems.

E Freeman: **What are some examples of Judeo-Christian principles that do not apply toward positively affecting the ills of the community?**

Rev. Zach: Judeo-Christianity tends to be self-loathing. It doesn't deal with truth on life's terms; it tends to deal with illusions and tries to approach life from 66 books. And within those books there is contradiction. It becomes really difficult and confusing because people don't understand it. The majority of Christians don't even understand the Bible they say they live by. It's not meant to be understood because it was written by a confused people—people who needed a spiritual experience on one level, but also needed answers to questions such as "What happens after life?" or "How was the world created?" Rather than say they didn't know, they created it.

E Freeman: **How is Liberation Theology different?**

Rev. Zach: Liberation Theology enables you to go to God yourself—a very individual approach to God and religion. It looks at principals. It looks at the metaphors within scriptures and the teachings of Christ and then asks is there something we can live by?

E Freeman: **What are the teachings of Christ used in your ministry which you say are lost in the more traditional approach to Christianity?**

Rev. Zach: The basis for the Unity ministry is love. Love is the unconditional basis for Jesus's teachings. He taught love across all traditional lines like race, class, political barriers and oppression. There are records that show that Jesus politically challenged and was not inhibited by political norms of the day. For example, the Samaritan woman who Jesus allowed to drink from the well. When Jesus was alive Jews believed that they were the chosen people and so in order to get God's love you had to be Jewish. But even after you converted to Judaism through a process known as Circumcision, you still were considered a second-class Jew. Jesus didn't teach that. That's why he gladly offered the Samaritan woman the water even though it had been supposedly only for Jews to drink. You don't have to go through a ritual of becoming a Jew to be accepted by God. Jesus celebrated and participated in rituals, but in and of themselves, rituals were not the things that determine God's love.

E Freeman: **What is the link between Judaism and Christianity?**

Rev. Zach: This whole concept of having to convert stems from Judaism and bleeds right over into Christianity. Christians today don't study Judaism enough to see the influence. But Jesus never taught that you had to convert to anything in order to get God's love. Being born again was not a part of the plan. Raising your consciousness of mind to realize that there is a force greater than man is the only requirement.

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